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IMPLICATIONS OF A STANDARD OF LIVING

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Any group, any community, or any era is foresighted that inquires into its standard of living, or, as the English writers and some economists style it, a standard of comfort, which is probably more expressive in its connotation. The implications involved are far-flung and far-reaching. Its sociological significances cannot be overestimated.

Since anthropological and ethnological works trace the development of man in his early mastery over the materials and forces of nature, attention here need simply be directed to the sociological significance of such development. In these days in place of a continuous struggle for mere subsistence, we desire abundant food of good quality, and many comforts and luxuries besides. We desire leisure for mental, moral, and aesthetic enjoyment, and prefer to spend as little economic energy as need be in order to attain these things. In other words, we demand a relatively greater return for a smaller economic effort. This becomes increasingly possible as we discover how to utilize what nature so generously supplies to us: as we learn to use more effectively, wood, stone, and metal, and to increase our store of these through the preservation and enlargement of our forests, the manufacture of artificial stone, by the making of steel, the extraction of aluminum from clay, or nitrogen from the air. As also we pass beyond the sail and the water mill to the enormous energies stored in stream and electricity, we reach a condition when Malthusianism becomes old-fashioned. For through these achievements food supplies are multiplied enormously, and the energy needed to attain them passes as a burden from human muscle to nature itself. The brain of man invents and guides the machine, and natural power does the rest. The man behind the machine symbolizes a great factor in dynamic civilization, as well as the man behind the gun. The real hopefulness of the situation at present is, that as long as the intellect of man can continue to make improvements in machinery, and utilize more efficiently natural resources, mankind will become more and more free from the fear of starvation; the standards of life will rise; slavery, serfdom, and unskilled labor will disappear, and with shorter hours of labor, which will involve intelligence rather than muscle, even the working classes will have leisure to devote themselves to cultural attainment, as is not possible under a system involving strenuous toil and unremitting poverty. . . .

If statistics were available, it would be possible to prove the march of civilization by noting historically the decrease in per cent of those who live from hand to mouth.¹

We see then the development of a progress which carries with it a concomitantly growing fund of wealth which makes possible a standard of living—

the greatest national asset of any civilized, enlightened, prosperous, and progressive people. . . . Undigged minerals and soils and water power and harbors, accumulated capital in manufacturing plants and road beds and rolling stock, native shrewdness in bargaining, native energy in labor, acquired knowledge of the arts of industry, are all of less significance, less fundamental importance, than that complex, subtle, intangible reality—the standard of life of the working people.

Trade unions exist mainly to protect the standard of life. When laborers in some great conflict seek to show that their cause is just because the low wages against which they protest are not sufficient to maintain their standard of life, they make, if they are sincere, the one irresistible appeal to which every patriot must pay heed, the appeal by which, if their evidence is sufficient, they will be justified in the long range view of human welfare. If war or industrial depression or irregular employment or famine or pestilent epidemic or demoralizing poor relief or the luxurious indulgence of vice breaks down the standard of life, this is for civilization its one real disaster, retrievable, it may be, by long and painful effort, but very probably not in the same nation or community. Such a disaster is not easily retrieved. Earthquake or flood or fire or defeat in arms may be but a slight disaster in the larger perspective of history, but any force which reaches the inner standards of the people, their ideas as to what manner of life they should lead, has a cumulative and incalculable effect on all their future welfare.²

Not alone in the field of sociology are the effects of a standard of living so far-reaching, but in the field of economics as well. Ely has this to say upon this point:

The standard of life is, by very definition, a fundamental factor in determining, in the long run, the supply of labor . . . because experience has shown that the standard of life affords an element of strength to laborers in their bargains with employers. Any encroachments on it are met with a strong and determined resistance. Moreover, a high standard of living is, as we have seen, one of the things that make for productive efficiency on the part of the laborer, and hence tends to increase his earning capacity.³

¹ Dealey, *Sociology*, pp. 105-9.

² E. T. Devine, *The Normal Life*, pp. 157, 158.

³ Richard T. Ely, *Outlines of Economics*, p. 278.

We have only lately come to realize the importance of the standard of living, for it is only a few years since Cardinal Manning of England "startled the English-speaking world by his enunciation of the right of man to a subsistence as prior to the rights of property as a doctrine of the church."¹ Gradually, however, such ideals have permeated the entire body politic and this spirit is summed up admirably by J. A. Ryan when he says:

The great majority of fair-minded persons believe, indeed, that labor does not get its full share of the wealth that it creates, but they are not agreed as to the precise measure of that ideal share. Upon one principle of partial justice unprejudiced men are, however, in substantial agreement. They hold that wages should be sufficiently high to enable the laborer to live in a manner consistent with the dignity of a human being.²

Even the casual observer will notice that by far the greater part of the discussions concerning the standard of living has revolved around the laborer's condition, the tacit assumption being that his standard was below the minimum. It is interesting briefly to review the various attempts that have been made to find out how the laborer spends his earnings and to note the occasions that stimulated or gave rise to the various inquiries and the uses that have been made of the various conclusions.

Financial exigencies of governments gave rise to the earliest attempts that we have noted. The purpose was to find whether an increase in taxes could be borne by the working population. Another occasion for these inquiries is the economic distress of the people as seen in the high prices for food, lack of employment, increasing demands for poor relief, unrest, and discontent—"les plaies sociales" as Visschers put it. The distress is sometimes acute, as in Eden's day, or at the time of the two Belgian investigations. It may be chronic like that of York and London that gave rise to the studies of Rountree and Booth. Scientific interest as well as humanitarian zeal attracted Engel and LePlay to the investigation of the subject, and the necessity of justifying their *raison d'être* has apparently led some of our State Labour Bureaus to enter the field.

The uses which have been made of the results of the inquiries into the cost of living are manifold. LePlay sought to utilize his family monographs in his argument for the maintenance of monogamic marriage and paternal authority. Engel connected his studies with generalizations regarding the economic

¹ Introduction to J. A. Ryan's *A Living Wage*, by Richard T. Ely.

² *A Living Wage*, p. vii.

welfare of the nation. Eden argued from his reports the need of change in the poor laws and other remedial legislation. Davies deduced from his data the need of establishing by law a minimum wage. Dietary experts use the figures of expenditure for food to show the need of education in domestic science, and protectionists compare standards of living in the United States and in Europe to justify the protective tariff. Arbitrators appeal to the figures of the family budget in deciding on the reasonableness of a given wage scale, and charitable organizations want to know how much a dependent family needs in order to live according to a normal standard.¹

We have run over, thus hastily and summarily, the far-reaching significances of a standard of life of the citizens of any polity. It will be interesting, therefore, to compare the definitions of a standard of life or comfort as given and discussed by the several writers in various divisions of scientific work. Chapin, in his study of the standard of living of workingmen in New York along the lines of an inquiry based upon actual budgets, defines it as a "measurement of life expressed in a daily routine which is determined by income and the conditions under which it is earned, economic and social environment, and capacity for distributing the income."² Devine, in his *Normal Life*, defines it as "that spiritual atmosphere, that indefinable force, compounded of income and what we buy with it, ideals and tastes and the environment provided by our fellows, which is something more than the sum of its parts, something different from any of them, a power to which unconsciously we defer in every choice we make, and which we frequently invoke to sustain arguments or justify general policies."³ Both of these last two definitions are from sociologists who are interested more particularly, if not solely with income, and expenditure as expressed in dollars and cents. They are interested in having the income provide for a standard of living sufficient to enable the family to be reared to a healthy manhood. They are interested in having this standard high enough to prevent deteriorating influences due to insufficiency from interacting and destroying the individual.

The economist, however, defines the standard somewhat differently. Ely tells us that "the number and character of the

¹ Chapin, *Standard of Living among Workingmen in New York City*, p. 20.

² Chapin, *op. cit.*, pp. 255, 256.

³ E. T. Devine, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

wants which a man considers more important than marriage and family constitute his standard of life."¹ He is here concerned with the relation of a standard of life to the supply of labor and discusses the validity of the subsistence theory of wages, asserting that "the amount paid in wages is obviously considerably more than is 'necessary to enable the laborers to subsist and to perpetuate their race, without either increase or diminution.'"²

The students of social psychology define the term somewhat differently again. Sumner uses it as "the measure of decency and suitability in material comfort (diet, dress, dwelling, etc.) which is traditional and habitual to a subgroup."³ Gabriel Tarde has studied the effects of imitation of dress and other characteristics of life on the standard of living.

In short, each one of our specialists has seen the connotation of the term in his own light—in its effects in the field of his specialty. From all, however, we can easily gather the exact meaning of a standard of living. To some it is a minimum standard; to others a habitual standard of comfort.

So far, we have discussed the far-reaching effects and some of the various definitions of a standard of living. We turn next, therefore, to a discussion of the determinants of a real standard—the yardstick by which we measure the level of the standard. What are the indispensable concomitants of a standard of living? We will study the individual chronologically—from his birth through old age.

A standard of living presumes first for the infant a healthy parentage which is conditioned by adequate prenatal care for and influences upon the mother. It has been aptly said that if you want to handle a child you begin with his grandfather; and the answer to this is that you must commence with the grandfather when he himself is a child. Proper parentage carries with it as a corollary the elimination of the unfit—the imbeciles and congenitally deformed individuals. A firm expression of our present-day standard of living is the recent example of the Chicago physician

¹ Ely, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

² *Ibid.*, p. 377.

³ William G. Sumner, *Folkways*, p. 171.

who permitted a deformed individual to die rather than allow it to have a malformed and unhappy existence. The infant must have a normal infancy in which it is nursed by its own mother and not cared for in a day nursery which is an anachronism in the twentieth century.

Its childhood should be dedicated to education in play and work. It should not be given over to work near coal chutes, near spinning jennies, or to uprooting beets in Colorado, to shining shoes for Greek padrones, to selling us our newspapers late at night or delivering them to us for our breakfast tables, or to work in canning factories in New York state, or to picking cranberries in the bogs.

The period of youth should be given over to good character-building. Character-building should not be done upon a basis of fear. Right living must become a religion, an emotion. An emotional opposition to evils must be instilled.

When the child reaches working age, which should not be under eighteen, he should already have been given the opportunity to test his aptitudes and attitudes toward various lines of human endeavors. He should have been given an opportunity to come in contact with various industries so that he may not choose a life's vocation blindly. He should know the possibilities of every trade and profession so that he does not choose a blind-alley occupation which will sap up the best years of his life ere he learns of the future in store for him. The industries should be so organized that unemployment shall disappear—that periods of rush and overwork which bring the toxin of fatigue and multiply industrial accidents should balance and fill out periods of slack which bring crime and vice through uncontrolled leisure. Wages should be adequate enough to permit marriage at an earlier date than at present possible.

After the individual has made a home for himself the question of the wise use of the income is paramount. This task descends to the woman. It is her primary task so long as the family is monogamic. The income of the family should not be earned by women and children; neither should the income be augmented by taking into the family lodgers or boarders who usually cause

domestic trouble. The wife should have been trained during her youth in the use of dietetics—how to buy the best food from a nutrition standpoint for the least expenditure. The wages of the husband should be adequate enough, also, to provide for days of sickness; days of unemployment due to industrial diseases and accidents should be paid for by industry and not by the individual—remembering as well, that these same diseases and accidents are largely preventable.

The period of maturity of the individual should provide him with leisure for further study and recreation; it should provide the wife with opportunity for social service for which her previous training has aptly fitted her. The family is no longer patriarchal, as has aptly been shown by Crapsey in his *Rise of the Working Class*, and a substitute must be evolved. What that substitute shall be is hard to predict. There is no doubt, however, that a change in the form of our family is slowly developing and that we are witnessing a formative process.

The period of old age should be free from worry and care. The individual should be free from dependence upon others and upon charitable impulses—he should be self-sufficient, if necessary by some form of social insurance. There is no more pathetic sight, and at the same time no greater indictment of the times, than the application by old, decrepit individuals who have given their best efforts and muscles to society, to hard-hearted relatives and frequently children, or to charitable organizations. That society is fortunate which has a large number of aged and pays deference to their comforts but not, however, to their psychology and philosophy. If we can transfer China's deference to the welfare of her aged without taking with it her solicitousness for their judgments and add it to our mode of life, our standard will have been materially elevated. We no longer subscribe to Nietzsche's doctrines in this direction.

These, then, are some of the determinants of a standard of life toward which those who are endeavoring to make a better world for those who shall follow are striving. It is a messianic ideal. We next turn to a study of some of the principle sociological aspects of a standard of living.

That there is intimate connection between the standard of living of a people and its marriage rate and resulting birth-rate there is no doubt. Malthus used this principle in accounting for the increased cost of living. We hear much of this correlation in arguments for the restriction of immigration.

Restraint from marriage for prudential reasons (Malthus in his *Essay on Population*) means the fear of losing, as a consequence of entering upon the responsibilities of the married state, the command of adequate means of subsistence. The means which will be regarded as adequate will vary according to the conception formed by the individual or the class to which he or she belongs, of the elements which make up subsistence; and it is this conception which is implied in the term "standard of comfort," or "standard of living."¹

This clearly states the tendency of individuals to maintain with a sometimes laudable tenacity their standard of living by a prudential restraint from marriage. This reasoning of Malthus was also used by the socialists Rodbertus and LaSalle, who have spoken of an "iron and cruel law of wages" which forces down wages by increasing the population. In connection with this statement we have the unique social device by which China encourages marriages by making infanticide easy. Marriage is there impelled, not by the profitableness of children, a device which is used in certain localities, but by the liberty and ease of destroying them. "In all great towns," says Mayo-Smith, "several [children] are every night exposed in the street, or drowned like puppies in the water. The performance of this horrid office is even said to be the avowed business by which some people earn their subsistence."² It is extremely questionable whether the ethical effect of lowering the value of life which this device implies does not do more harm than restraint from marriage with its concomitants of vice and disease.

There is an obvious close connection between low marriage rate and low birth-rate. Various and many causes have been assigned to this somewhat alarming phenomenon of modern life both in America and elsewhere—notably in France. Ellwood in his *Sociology and Social Problems* assigns six causes. We are

¹ Palgrave, *Dictionary of Political Economy*, p. 337.

² R. Mayo-Smith, *Statistics and Economics*, p. 76.

here concerned, more particularly, if not solely, with the standard of living and the low birth-rate. We leave out, therefore, the physiologic causes of sterility of women and diseased condition of men.

Economic conditions are without doubt mainly at the bottom of the decreasing birth-rate in the native white population. Certain unfavorable economic conditions have developed in this country of recent years for this particular element; especially have higher standards of living increased among the native white population in the United States more rapidly than their income. This has led to later marriages and smaller families. Again, more intense competition along all lines has forced certain elements of the native stock into occupations where wages are low in comparison with the standard of living. . . . The native born . . . have retired for the most part to the more socially honorable occupations, such as clerkships in business, the professions, and the like. In many of these occupations, however, as we have already said, the wages are low as compared with the standards of living maintained by that particular occupational class; hence, as we have already said, later marriages and fewer births. . . . No legislator can devise means of encouraging a class to have large families when by so doing that class would necessarily have to sacrifice some of its standards of living.¹

The somewhat valid criticism of the feminist movement as being responsible for a part of this decreasing birth-rate is based upon the fact that the educated woman is loath to give up her standard of living—both material comfort and an individual life's work and *Weltanschauung*—to bring children into the world. There is little doubt, however, that this attitude is due to the still partially misunderstood woman's movement and is but transitory. There is no doubt, and there are not wanting signs to substantiate the fact, that so soon as man has fully taken woman at a par, marriages will be contracted to meet the new standards and our birth-rate will be correspondingly increased.

A standard of living operates upon an individual as such and secondly upon an individual as a member of social group or social unit—the family. Treatises have been written tending to prove that the family as we have known it for years is breaking up. Just as the patriarchal type of family life as known to the Hebrews and at one time to the Romans gave way to a decentralized family life, so our present-day family is breaking up. Just what the

¹ Charles A. Ellwood, *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*, pp. 146 f.

family will evolve into we cannot predict; however, we do see certain tendencies in this formative process.

The higher standards of living and comfort which have come with the growth of our industrial civilization, especially of our cities, must also be set down as a cause of increasing instability of the family. Higher standards of living are, of course, desirable if they can be realized, that is, if they are reasonable. But many elements of our population have standards of living and comfort which they find are practically impossible to realize with the income which they have. Many classes, in other words, are unable to meet the social demands which they suppose they must meet in order to maintain a home. To found and maintain a home, therefore, with these rising standards of living, and also within the last decade or two with the rising cost of living, requires such a large income that an increasingly smaller proportion of the population are able to do this satisfactorily. From this cause, undoubtedly, a great deal of domestic misery and unhappiness results, which finally shows itself in desertion or the divorce court.

It is evident that higher standards of taste and higher standards of morality may also operate under certain circumstances to render the family life unstable in a similar way.¹

The standard of living which, as we saw above, operates to postpone the age of marriage acts in another manner to tend to break up the family.

It may do so in this manner. After thirty, psychologists tell us, one's habits are relatively fixed and hard to change. People who marry after thirty, therefore, usually find greater difficulty in adjusting themselves to each other than people who marry somewhat younger; and every marriage necessarily involves an adjustment of individuals to each other. This being so, we can readily understand that late marriages are more apt to result in faulty adjustments in the family relation than marriages that take place in early maturity.²

So much for the social effects of a standard of living. What of the economic effects? First of all we look at the significance of a high standard of living. It has been said that you can take corn away from an Englishman but not from an Irishman. The significance is that a high standard allows for some contraction of which a low standard does not permit. A high standard of living, moreover, may under certain conditions act as a stimulus to further efforts upon the part of workingmen. Ricardo has somewhere

¹ Ellwood, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 148 f.

put it that "the friends of humanity cannot but wish that in all countries the laboring classes should have a taste for comforts and enjoyments, and that they should be stimulated by all legal means in their exertions to procure them." The social effect of a high standard of living is stated by Smith as follows:

A plentiful subsistence increases the bodily strength of the laborer, and the comfortable hope of bettering his condition, and of ending his days perhaps in ease and plenty, animates him to exert that strength to the utmost. Where wages are high, accordingly, we shall always find the workman more active, diligent, and expeditious, than where they are low. . . .¹

Compare the sodden and slovenly population of India and China with the progressive workmen of a New England town. Compare the efficiency of the Ford automobile shops with a \$5.00 minimum daily wage and any other similar factory. With this as a basic fact we can readily deduce the importance of a rising standard of living. Smith again says:

Servants, laborers, and workmen of different kinds make up the far greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconvenience to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their own labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.²

The foregoing facts being so, we can deduce the state and stage of a society by its standard of living. It is merely reversing the process. Adam Smith has the following to say upon the principle:

The liberal reward of labor, therefore, as it is the necessary effect, so it is the natural symptom of increasing natural wealth. The scanty maintenance of the laboring poor, on the other hand, is the natural symptom that things are at a stand, and their starving condition that they are going fast backwards.³

Not only can we infer the level of a country by its standard of living, but we can deduce the character of a family by its standard of living as expressed in its budget. Engel's law so-called gives

¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Part I, chap. viii, p. 86.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

this in precise form. Engel has pointed out that we can use the single figure, namely percentage of income devoted to food, as an index of material prosperity. "The larger this figure, the poorer the population or the family; the smaller this figure, the greater the command which such a family or community has over the comforts and luxuries of life."¹

We have discussed thus far the effect of a standard of living as related to economics and sociology. What have the social psychologists to offer on this score? Gabriel Tarde in his inimitable *Laws of Imitation* has studied the social effects of imitating standards of living.

The first French Court dates from Charles VIII; but we must not think that the imitative contagion of court manners and luxury took several centuries to reach down to the common people of France. From the time of Louis XII its influence was felt everywhere. The disasters of the religious wars arrested its development in the sixteenth century, but, in the following century, it started up again very rapidly. Then the miseries brought on by the last war of the Grand Monarch occasioned another setback. During the eighteenth century there was a fresh start; under the Revolution, another reaction. In the time of the First Empire the advance began again on a great scale; but from that time on it took a democratic form about which we need not trouble ourselves for the moment. Under Francis I and Henry II the spread of the luxury begun under Louis XII continued. At this period a sumptuary law forbade "all peasants, laborers, and valets, unless attached to princes, to wear silken doublets or hose overladen or puffed out with silk." From 1543 to the time of the League there were eight important ordinances against luxury. "Some of them," says Baudrillart, "apply to every French subject; they interdict the use of cloth of gold, of silver, or of silk." Such was the general elegance that prevailed on the eve of the religious wars. To justify laws in restraint of trade "one of the reasons most frequently cited was the fact that France was ruining itself in the purchase of objects of luxury." Besides, the same fact is revealed in the prosperity of the industries of luxury which presuppose an extensive patronage.²

To Tarde also wars are occasioned by clashes of standards of living.

Today, the nations which are entering upon civilization are the markets for the old nations of Europe, because they have caught the contagion of new

¹ Mayo-Smith *op. cit.* p. 53.

² Gabriel Tarde *Lois de l'imitation*, Parson's translation, pp. 218-19.

wants without being as yet stung to emulation by the sight of new industry. England's world-wide commercial conquests, so fruitful of immense consequences, result from this.¹

This is indeed a prophetic utterance of the present conflict when one hears much about Germany's desire for a "place in the sun." The imitation of standards of living also gives industries the opportunity to develop.

The ardent homilies of innumerable Savonarolas, the preachings of Luther and his followers, the passionate theories of our Encyclopedists, were all necessary factors in causing almost all classes and nations to consciously and openly dress and live in approximately the same way. It is this condition which permits industry to unfold.²

This imitation of standards of living still goes on unabated and apace. Today it is being stimulated by appealing advertisements and street hawkers and well-displayed windows. Indeed, a class of men has developed with this as a prime function.

We saw above how class imitation of standard of living has tended to develop a decadent nation and resulted in sumptuary laws. It is not alone on the side of imitation of a standard of living which tends to develop extravagance and a resulting period of vice, but social demands of one's group can have the same effect. Sumner in his study of the folkways has this to say:

It is often wise and necessary to disregard the social standard of comfort because it imposes foolish expenses and contemptible ostentation, but it is very difficult to disregard the social standard of comfort. The standard is upheld by fear of social disapproval, if one derogates from class "respectability." The disapproval or contempt of one's nearest associates is the sanction. The standards and code of respectability are in the class mores. They get inside of the mind and heart of the members of the class, and betray each to the class demands.

If, however, the standard of living which one has inherited from his class is adopted as an individual standard, and is made the object of effort and self-denial, the individual and social results are of high value. One man said, "Live like a hog and you will behave like one"; to which another replied, "Behave like a hog and you will live like one." Both were right in about equal measure. The social standard of a class acts like honor. It sustains self-respect and duty to self and family. The pain which is produced by deroga-

¹ Tarde, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

tion produces effort and self-denial. The social standard may well call out and concentrate all there is in a man to work for his social welfare. Evidently the standard of living can never do more than that. It can never add anything to the forces in a man's own character and attainments.¹

What strength develops from derogation from one's customary standard may be seen from the awe with which Basarov, the hero in Turgeniev's *Fathers and Children*, is held by some and the opprobrium which he drew forth from others.

We have traced the various implications of a standard of living. It has become patent that the standard of living has been slowly raised throughout the ages and that consequently the whole basis of civilization has undergone, *pari passu*, a metamorphosis. Says Patten, in his *New Basis of Civilization*:

Those who would predict tomorrow's economic states from a study of the economic states of Rome or Venice overlook the difference between a society struggling to meet a deficit and one so well situated that thought can be centered on the equitable distribution of a surplus. In the one case the civilization must develop its traditions to keep the deficit as small as possible and eventually overcome it, and in the other to utilize the surplus for common good, not to undermine energy and productive ability or to create parasitic classes, but to distribute the surplus in ways that will promote general welfare and secure better preparation for the future. The one type of society may be called a pain or deficit economy, the other a pleasure or surplus economy.²

¹ Sumner, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-72.

² Simon Patten, *A New Basis of Civilization*, p. 9.